

US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East

A monthly report of the Mitvim Institute

Edited by Rebecca Bornstein*

Volume 5, Issue 12, December 2017

A. US-Israel Relations

- **Jerusalem Announcement** - Trump's announcement on Jerusalem prompted concern within the region; US government officials were urged to defer travel to Israel, and embassies throughout the region increased security. Trump's decision [reportedly divided senior staff members](#), with Defense Secretary Mattis, CIA Director Pompeo, and Secretary of State Tillerson privately lobbying against the decision, and Vice President Pence, UN Ambassador Haley, and Ambassador Friedman pushing in favor. Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Kushner, along with Special Envoy Greenblatt, reportedly supported recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital but urged Trump to delay an embassy move. Russia [sharply criticised](#) the move, and Foreign Minister Lavrov said that it ["defies common sense."](#) This positioning from Moscow is likely intended to strengthen Russia's leverage in the region relative to that of the US.
- **Saban Forum** - Prime Minister Netanyahu, former Prime Minister Barak, and Kushner spoke at the Brookings Institution [Saban Forum 2017](#). Speaking before Trump's Jerusalem announcement, [Kushner said](#) that "with regards to trust in the mediator, I think we've done our job [...] both sides really trust the President." He would be unlikely to repeat those comments after Palestinian leaders said that Trump's announcement rules out the possibility of continued US mediation. Meanwhile, the Saban Forum opened with the [release of a new poll by the University of Maryland](#) on American public opinion that found that 59 percent of Americans prefer that Trump lean towards neither side in the conflict (the [poll, conducted by Shibley Telhami](#), also shows that 63 percent of Americans oppose moving the embassy to Jerusalem).
- **Taylor Force Act** - The House of Representatives passed [H.R. 1164](#) (the "Taylor Force Act"), a bill to condition US assistance to the Palestinians on the termination of [specified payments](#) to the families of terrorists. The bill was [heavily debated](#), and language was added to the House bill to ensure that US funding for specific security and humanitarian activities would continue. [AIPAC](#), [AJC](#), and the head of the [ADL](#) backed the legislation and applauded the decision to pass the bill.
- **Anti-BDS Legislation** - The emerging public discussion on anti-BDS legislation focuses on its relationship to constitutionally-protected freedom of speech, as well as the frequent conflation between Israel and "Israel-controlled territory" (settlements). In November, two political candidates in Georgia clashed over [their views](#) on such legislation. Separately, in an article

* Rebecca Bornstein is Director of External Relations and Researcher at the Mitvim Institute, rbornstein@mitvim.org.il. Previous issues of this monthly report can be read [here](#).

titled "[penalizing BDS is un-American.](#)" J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami argued that instead of undermining the global BDS movement, the legislation actually “garners BDS sympathy from liberal and progressive audiences who may support Israel but are critical of its government - and believe that the free speech protections of the First Amendment must not be trampled.” Foundation for Middle East Peace President [Lara Friedman released an overview](#) of [S. 720](#) (the “Israel Anti-Boycott Act”) breaking down the effects of the proposed national-level legislation.

B. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process/Conflict

- **Jerusalem Announcement** - Trump’s announcement on Jerusalem was delivered on its own, without the context of a broader US policy plan that addresses Palestinian aspirations for a capital and distinguishes between East and West Jerusalem. As a result, the Palestinians said that the US had lost its ability to mediate the conflict and announced that they will not meet with Vice President Pence during his upcoming visit. On the other hand, some reports indicate that the US [coordinated the announcement](#) with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to ensure a moderate response from those two strategic countries and support for a broader peace effort.

PLO Delegation in Washington - Secretary Tillerson sent a letter to Palestinian leaders, warning that their diplomatic offices in Washington may be shuttered as a result of claims made by Palestinian President Abbas. The State Department said that Abbas’ statements that [the International Criminal Court \(ICC\) should investigate](#) Israel run counter to a legal provision that says the PLO cannot operate in Washington if they pursue action against Israel through the ICC. Following the letter, the Trump administration decided that the diplomatic delegation could remain open for at least 90 days, but that its activity would be limited solely to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. In return, the PLO [threatened to suspend](#) communication with Washington.

C. The Changing Middle East

- **The GCC Crisis** - The administration invited the feuding parties to [talks at Camp David](#), but only Qatar agreed. Qatar’s foreign minister reportedly said that his country [has US backing](#) to resolve the conflict but is also prepared for any military escalation. Reports of disunity within the Trump administration continue to surface; the common perception is that Kushner and Tillerson [clash](#) most over the issue, with Kushner siding with Saudi Arabia.
- **Saudi Arabia/Yemen-** Trump finally [requested that Saudi Arabia](#) allow urgent humanitarian supplies to reach Yemen, amid the humanitarian catastrophe that continues to unfold there. According to the UN, [over twenty million people urgently require aid](#). This is a rare request; since taking office, the Trump administration has refrained from criticising the Saudi-led coalition’s activities in Yemen and the civilian casualties it has caused, despite the fact that the US provides military assistance to the coalition. The House of Representatives also passed [a nonbinding resolution](#) stating that the provision of military assistance to Saudi Arabia is not authorized under Congressional counter-terrorism legislation.
- **Saudi Arabia/Lebanon** - The Trump administration provided limited content on Lebanese President Hariri’s status in Saudi Arabia and abrupt resignation from Riyadh via a broadcast by the Saudi-funded al-Arabiya channel. The State Department said that the US “strongly [supports the sovereignty and independence](#) of the Republic of Lebanon and of its political institutions [...]

the US cautions against any party, within or outside Lebanon, using Lebanon as a venue for proxy conflicts or in any manner contributing to instability in that country.” Later, the State Department ["welcomed"](#) Hariri's return to Lebanon. Hariri has since rescinded his resignation, and Tillerson and Hariri are scheduled to meet in Paris in December during a [ministerial meeting](#) of the [International Lebanon Support Group](#), which includes the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

- **Syria** - The US strongly condemned the continued siege on Eastern Ghouta in Syria by the [Assad regime with support from Russia](#). The administration called on Russia to “live up to its obligations to uphold the de-escalation zone and end all further attacks against civilians” and support the UN-led Geneva process and the renewal of UNSCR 2165 on humanitarian access. UN mediator de Mistura [criticized](#) a new track that Russia is pushing, including a peace conference in Sochi in the coming months. He warned that if one side was “de facto sabotaging” the Geneva process, it would harm any other political process. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) concluded that sarin was used as a chemical weapon in Syria in March 2017. The White House called the findings “disturbing but [not surprising](#),” as the site in question is near Khan Shaykhun -- where the Assad regime used sarin against civilians during the same week. The White House urged the UN Security Council to renew the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism in order to officially determine responsibility for the attacks, and accused Russia of protecting the Assad regime and the terrorists who use chemical weapons.
- **The Islamic State** - US officials hosted a [meeting](#) of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS that focused on ISIS's global networks and post-conflict stabilization projects in Iraq and Syria. Strategy for a post-Islamic State Middle East is high on the international agenda. Brookings experts released an [article](#) highlighting the need for a strategy to end regional civil wars and strengthen states suffering from internal conflict, as well as a plan to bolster long-term stability by advancing economic and political reform in the region.
- **Turkey** - US naval forces participated in a [Turkish-led maritime exercise](#) designed to improve combat and operational capacity, and strengthen relationships among NATO allies. But on the political front, tensions between the US and Turkey escalated over Trump's Jerusalem announcement and the [Zarrab case](#). Surprisingly, in late November, Turkey announced that Trump pledged that the US [will stop arming Kurdish YPG fighters](#) in Syria. When asked about the announcement, a Pentagon spokesperson said that “we are reviewing pending adjustments to the military support provided to our Kurdish partners in as much as the military requirements of our defeat-ISIS and stabilization efforts will allow to prevent ISIS from returning,” but stopped short of confirming the decision.

D. The Iran Deal and its Aftermath

- **The future of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)** - The policy rift between the US and the EU deepens on the issue of the JCPOA. EU officials [continue to emphasize](#) that the deal is working and discourage unilateral action. A State Department spokesperson reportedly said that “the president has directed his administration to work with Congress and our partners to fix the JCPOA. We are not encouraging Congress to reimpose sanctions at this time.” Thus far, the administration has not laid out a policy for addressing Iran's ballistic missile development or regional involvement; this month, Iran continued to solidify its influence in Syria.

E. Further reading

Topic	Articles
Israel / Peace Process	Shibley Telhami, " Why is Trump undoing decades of U.S. policy on Jerusalem? " <i>Brookings Markaz</i> , December 5, 2017
	Lara Friedman and Khaled Elgindy, " Locking Palestinians in a flawed peace process. " <i>Brookings</i> , December 5, 2017
Middle East	Shalom Lipner, " How Obama and Trump left a vacuum in the Middle East. " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , November 28, 2017
	Brittney Washington, " The Gulf of Aden needs US-China maritime cooperation. " <i>CNAS</i> , November 6, 2017
	Suzanne Maloney and Michael O'Hanlon, " A Strategy for the Post-ISIS Middle East. " <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , November 7, 2017
	Amanda Sloat, " The Trump administration can't give Turkey a hall pass on rule of law. " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , November 7, 2017
Iran	Megan Reiss, " Did Iran sanctions make the Revolutionary Guard stronger? " <i>Foreign Policy</i> , November 3, 2017
	Sean Illing interviewing Suzanne Maloney, " Why an expert thinks we're as close to war with Iran as we've been in 25 years. " <i>Vox</i> , November 29, 2017

F. Monthly Timeline

Date	Event
November 8	The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) releases a report concluding that sarin was used as a chemical weapon in al-Lataminah, Syria
November 10	Tillerson speaks in support of Lebanese Prime Minister al-Hariri
November 17	The House of Representatives passes a non-binding resolution that sending American military assistance to Saudi Arabia for its campaign in Yemen is not authorized under Congressionally-authorized counterterrorism legislation
November 21	Trump speaks with Russian President Putin about implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and supporting the Geneva Process
November 24	Trump speaks with Turkish President Erdogan about Syria and the strategic partnership between the two countries
November 24	Trump speaks with President al-Sisi of Egypt after the attack in Egypt's North Sinai province.
November 27	Pence meets with King Abdullah II of Jordan about Iran and ISIS
November 29	Tillerson meets with Bahraini Crown Prince al-Khalifa